

3 April 1961

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
THROUGH : Deputy Director (Intelligence)
SUBJECT : Soviet Attitude Toward Castro Prior
to His Takeover

1. Moscow made no major effort to propagandize the Cuban situation until late 1958 and it was not until after mid-1959 that the USSR began to build up Fidel Castro's role in the revolution. Soviet propaganda on Cuba during most of 1957 consisted of one or two radio commentaries a week--almost all to Latin American or Soviet listeners--on the popular resistance against Batista. Routine home service news items in 1957 and most of 1958 occasionally reported on rebel activity, but no attempt was made to portray the possibility of a major civil war. During the US landing in Lebanon in mid-1958, Moscow briefly increased its propaganda coverage of Cuba with charges that the US was about to intervene in support of Batista. The main theme of Soviet propaganda was the standard charge that unrest in Cuba stemmed from opposition to a dictatorship subservient to US monopolies. During this period, Moscow made no attempt to define Castro's position beyond

stressing his goal of overthrowing Batista. It did not acknowledge his professed anti-Communism or discuss his choice of Urrutia, an avowed anti-Communist, as Batista's successor. The USSR thus stopped short of a commitment to Castro, restricting itself to expressions of sympathy for an anti-Batista movement.

2. Moscow's caution in commenting on the rebellion suggests surprise at the sudden collapse of the Batista regime and uncertainty regarding Castro's intentions. As late as October 1958 in an interview with Latin American journalists, Khrushchev appeared to discount Castro's chances of success by referring to the "tragic fate" of Guatemala in a discussion of the "heroic struggle" of the people of Cuba against Batista. A further indication of Moscow's apparent failure to anticipate the course of the revolution was the failure of the Cuban Popular Socialist (Communist) party to identify itself with the Castro movement before the closing months of 1958. At the meeting of world Communist leaders in Moscow last December the Secretary of the Cuban party defended its role against criticism by stating that "if we had said where and how many we were during the guerrilla days, US imperialism would have destroyed us."

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3. In the last weeks of December 1958, on the eve of Castro's success and after the Cuban Communists switched their support to the Castro movement, Soviet propaganda coverage was sharply increased. Moscow Radio devoted more attention to the rebellion in the final week than in any other. Almost all of its commentaries were beamed to Latin America, but on 29 December 1958 Moscow began broadcasting to Europe as well. From 29 to 31 December the rebels' gains were played up in 25 world-wide broadcasts, nearly twice the preceding week's volume. Communist China also increased its attention toward the end of November and sustained it through most of December. Peiping's coverage was in contrast to almost nonexistent commentary during most of 1958. In the first nine months of 1958, for example, there were only three Peiping broadcasts on the Cuban situation.

4. In the week before Batista's flight, Moscow gave the revolution an anti-US flavor by charging that Washington was sending large quantities of arms to Batista and was interfering openly in the rebellion. Moscow also charged that the US was "conspiring against the Cuban people through its ambassador in Cuba." Batista's reported preparations for an offensive against

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the rebels were said to have "coincided with the return of US Ambassador Smith from Washington." The Soviet military journal, Red Star, on 21 December pointed to "increasing demands in Washington that US marines be sent into Cuba."

5. While expressing sympathy with the 26 July movement, Soviet propaganda took pains to deny exclusive leadership of the "liberation struggle" to Fidel Castro. He received no personal praise, and Moscow emphasized the "important role" of the Cuban Communists in the fight against Batista. Moscow promptly hailed the victory of the Cuban rebels as another defeat for US imperialism and accorded it maximum propaganda exploitation. The volume of comment was greater than that given to any Latin American development since the Guatemalan revolt in mid-1954. The main theme continued to be alleged US support for Batista up to the last minute. Moscow claimed that the US was adopting a new line, "pretending to be a friend of Cuba," while maneuvering to reimpose US domination. US recognition of the new government was described as conditioned by demands that American monopolies be granted "all the privileges received during the years of the dictatorship." The revolution was depicted as a struggle of all the Cuban people for democratic reforms and Soviet propaganda gave Cuban Communists a large share of the

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credit for the victory. Consistent with its emphasis on the broad base of the rebel movement, Moscow refrained from endorsing the exclusive leadership of the revolution by Fidel Castro and the 26 July movement. An East German comment in the party paper Neues Deutschland commented that "it remains to be seen" whether Castro, "a man of bourgeois descent," will really put into practice his program of "democratic reforms." Moscow and other bloc commentators, however, made no assessment of the political complexion of the new government but merely echoed President Voroshilov's message in the first week of January 1959 announcing Soviet recognition and wishing the Cuban people success.

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cc: DDCI

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